

Lawmakers want court to acknowledge failed education efforts

Report card due to WA Supreme Court by April 30 will include discussion of bills that didn't pass

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Hard at work on their computers at Gig Harbor High School, students in the Gig Harbor Computer Science Club are learning the ins and outs of code writing and other essential skills that will carry over into the working world.

LEE GILES III/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

After meeting Monday with attorneys, state lawmakers say they'll convene again April 29 to finalize the Legislature's report to the state Supreme Court on a long-term plan to fund education in Washington.

But in addition to discussing what lawmakers did this year to boost education spending, the report — due to the court April 30 — will probably include a long list of this year's legislative failures.

State Sen. Dave Frockt, D-Seattle, said that lawmakers want the court to understand that even if they didn't finish all their work this year, they introduced ideas that may gain traction next year when the Legislature works on a new two-year budget.

"I think it is important for them to understand the context that all of us view this upcoming budget year as absolutely critical," Frockt said Monday. "Everybody recognizes that the upcoming budget cycle is unquestionably the make-or-break year."

The Supreme Court told lawmakers in January that they hadn't made adequate progress toward fully funding the state's education system, and ordered them to deliver a detailed, four-year funding plan to the court by the end of April.

The January order was a follow-up to the court's 2012 McCleary decision, which said the Legislature was shirking its constitutional duty to fully fund basic education.

A list of education funding measures that lawmakers rejected in 2014 will most likely be part of the Legislature's April 30 response to the court, said Frockt, who co-chairs the committee working on the issue.

Those failed measures included a plan to close tax exemptions to raise more money for education, as well as a proposal to require that two-thirds of all new revenues be spent on K-12 education.

"From my standpoint, I think it is important for the court to see that we're not standing still and not doing anything," Frockt said. "We're moving forward and trying."

The McCleary ruling gives state lawmakers until 2018 to amply fund the state's education system, while the court keeps a close eye on their progress.

But lawmakers adjourned in March without passing legislation detailing how they plan to increase education funding in the next three to four years.

The Legislature included an additional \$58 million for K-12 materials and supplies in the supplemental budget it passed last month, which was far less than what Democratic Gov. Jay Inslee and state schools chief Randy Dorn had requested.

Legislative staff estimated Monday that lawmakers must increase education funding by at least an additional \$3.5 billion by 2018 to meet the court's demands.

State Sen. Bruce Dammeier, a Republican from Puyallup who is vice chair of the Senate's education committee, said he thinks the Supreme Court in its January order "was probably

expecting a larger amount” from the Legislature this year in terms of an increase in education funding.

But Dammeier said anything greater would have been difficult in a 60-day session when lawmakers were mainly making small tweaks to the two-year, \$33.6 billion budget they passed in 2013.

“A supplemental budget is just for minor adjustments, so their expectations might be a little unrealistic,” Dammeier said Monday.

Dammeier said he hopes telling the justices about education legislation that was proposed and failed this year will “help them understand the legislative body a little better.”

“The discussion of bills — even those that did not pass — that can build support for a final solution,” Dammeier said.

Lawmakers’ report also will most likely cite a change made to require students in the class of 2019 and beyond to complete 24 credits of coursework to earn a diploma, Dammeier said.

Both Dammeier and Frockt said they are optimistic that lawmakers can agree on a single report to deliver to the court by the end of the month — though they said it is hard to say until committee members have a chance to read the final language.

Previously, lawmakers had discussed the possibility of political caucuses issuing separate progress reports in response to the court’s order.

Read more here: <http://www.theolympian.com/2014/04/14/3086960/lawmakers-want-court-to-acknowledge.html#storylink=cpy>